



# THROUGH THE BREAK

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**B**reakers rise like hulking sea eagles. They glide and swoop, then crash, tossing prey of bodies and boards on the sand, hissing to retreat and hurl again.

Shai has been coming all summer, catching three buses to stand at the shoreline, close his eyes, crunch warm shell grit between his toes. Like he did on his old island home.

But here the water is restless, the swell unhampered by coral reef. Signs talk of rips.

He watches surfers spear through waves on their way out back; Counts one ... two ... three ... till they emerge, heads craning out to sea, the practised flick of their hair spraying spangles in the sunlight.

He'll be there with them ... one day.

Fingers of foam stroke his feet, teasing, tantalising.

They call to him. Shai! Shai!

Shai grips the pitted second-hand board tightly to his thin brown chest. Today, he murmurs.

Today.

The waves roll relentlessly, no break inviting him. Heart hammering, Shai wades in to his waist, flings legs onto his board, strokes towards the looming curve of green crystal.

Commits, too late to turn back.

The water wall silvers and fragments above him. He dips his board's nose as he's seen others do. Spears into his fear.

Ears, eyes, nostrils swamped, his body squeezes in on itself. Sky blends with ocean floor. He feels the shove of wave, hears nothing but the tinkle of rolling shells.

Counts one ... two ... three...

Suddenly, he shoots upwards, body rigid, blue-knuckled, in the silkwater beyond, the wave bellowing behind him to shore. Yelps with joy! Paddles until breakers can no longer drag him back.

Keeps paddling, freer with each pull.

He closes eyes against the sun, rests his head on his arms ... and drifts. Elated. Serene.

But beneath, cold currents jostle. They sweep him out deep, to the sea beyond the toppled-pancake cliffs.

Shai lifts his head, scrunches his eyes. The beach is a far-away smear between glaring sea and sky. He is alone in the sapphire expanse.

All is quiet but the water licking at him under his gently rocking board. *Glup-glup... Glup-glup...*

His heart thumps. *Doom-doom... Doom-doom...*

Through tear-blurred eyes, the shore recedes as he floats. Too far away to signal for help. No boat in sight.

Shai swallows panic, begins the long paddle in. Gets nowhere. Remembers the signs that talk of rips.

*Plop!* A shag surfaces, droplets glistening on its snake-neck feathers. It hisses. *I sssuggest you sssteer ssslighly to ssstarboard!*

Shai gasps. The bird jabs its beak towards his nose. *Sssorry to ssstartle you, but you ssseemed to need sssome assistance.*

Shai takes the shag's advice, paddling across the current. The bird is right. The rip is not so strong this way. He makes some headway, his companion cruising effortlessly alongside.

*Plop!* The shag disappears, emerging on the other side of Shai's board. *I'd ssswim in with you, but I ssstart to sssink when I ssswim this ssslwly!* Throwing its head back in an undulating arc, the bird laughs at its joke then, *Plop!* disappears altogether. Shai is cold and alone.

He pushes on. The white flare of beach slowly broadens. The sun hammers his back and his salt-crust ed eyes begin to sting. He wants to rest but the current will draw him back out if he does.

*Ffft-ffff! Ffft-ffff! Ffft-ffff!* A school of flying fish shims past the prow of Shai's board, teasing the surface, darting and skipping like iridescent butterflies.

*C'mon fffriend, let's fffind some fffun!* They call out in voices like popping bubbles.

Shai's weariness blows away. He chases them. "Slow down!" he cries, stroking hard to keep up.

Flying fish flit and skim, circling and skipping on the water in front of him, their jewelled jackets sparkling. *Fffaster! Fffaster!* they urge.

Shai pulls his arms through the water until his hands begin to numb and his chest hammers.

But when he next looks towards shore he can make out ant-people on the beach.

*We're affraid to go fffurther. Good luck, fffriend!* The fish dash away. Shai is alone again.

He pulls one arm then the other through the salty haze. Each stroke is like pulling a laden fishing net. The sun slumps towards the horizon, its flames baking his back. Salt stabs his throat.

He might rest a little, drift back across the swells towards far-away shores. The shores of his island before the terrors began. Coconut palms, skinny chickens in dusty streets, sweet-potato patches.

Eyes close, head drops, arms go limp. Can't paddle any further.

*Thoonk!* Shai grabs the edges of his board. A dark shape circles below, looming closer and closer. *Thoonk!* It butts the board again, nearly toppling him.

Shai scrambles as the creature glides away, its diamond fins fluting through the water, its poisonous barb nestled against the base of its lazily trailing tail.

The stingray cruises towards Shai. On seagrass breath it huffs, *Hhhurry now. You are nearly hhome.*

Eyes wide, Shai watches the creature glide by. With a flip of a fin, it wheels around to trail its tail again by Shai. The breeze is freshening. Twilight gilds the whitecaps.

*Hhasten!* the stingray bids. Shai swallows, follows the whip-like tail.

In a flick, the ray is flying through the water, its glistening fins undulating like silk in the breeze that stirs before a storm. Shai strokes after it through the aqua, entranced, rhythmically pulling arms, kicking legs.

Land draws close. Enough to see faces of people on the beach. The boy from faraway, who all hot summer cringed in the shallows, the waves, those liquid raptors, his captors, is not among them.

Ahead is the line of breakers, bruised violet in the last light, their crests spitting and whipping in the wind. The stingray hovers, lurching with the swell, till Shai claws on the back of a wave, is carried in a roaring rush to shore.

He tucks his head, rolling with the sand and froth and shells till, panting and grazed, he lies on the hard edge of the beach, his new country.

Shai staggers to his feet. Bends sideways. Shakes water and animal visions from his head.

Stands on tiptoe to see where the sea licks the sunset.  
Farewells another island, out there somewhere, beyond  
the break. Smiles.

Collects the board washed up the beach a way. Heads  
through the dunes to what he'll now call home.